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For Immediate Release

Joint Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) project to promote healing, reconciliation with Indigenous Canadians

Project at former Mohawk Residential School in Brantford, Ont. "not a typical disaster response"

A joint release from MCC, MDS Canada, Woodland Cultural Centre (WCC)

BRANTFORD, Ont. -- How do you repair a disaster 142 years in the making? For Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) Canada and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), it will happen one desk, one table, and one bench at a time.

This summer, the two organizations will be working together with the Woodland Cultural Centre to help in the restoration of the former Mohawk Residential School in Brantford, Ont.

"It's not a typical MDS disaster response," says Nick Hamm, chair of the Ontario unit. "But Residential Schools were a disaster for Canada's Indigenous people."

Through the project, "we can play a small role in promoting reconciliation and healing, and also promote awareness to volunteers about what happened there . . . the building represents so many horrors."

During its time of operation from 1828 to 1970, thousands of Indigenous children were sent to the school—separated from their families, stripped of their heritage and not allowed to use their language. Some were physically, sexually, and psychologically abused.

When it closed, the school and lands were returned to the Six Nations of the Grand River, which opened the Woodland Cultural Centre in 1972. In 2014, after a storm severely damaged the building, the community was asked whether to tear it down or save it. An overwhelming majority voted to restore it, launching a fundraising campaign titled "Save the Evidence."

Through the campaign, grants for major repairs were received from various levels of government. But assistance was still needed to complete exhibits for the Centre.

In 2016, Woodlands asked MCC if it could help. "We were honoured to receive the request, and asked MDS to partner with us," says Lyndsay Mollins Koene, who coordinates MCC's Ontario Indigenous Neighbours program. "We're so glad they've come alongside."

During the four-week project, which starts in July, youth groups from Ontario and B.C. will build desks for a representative classroom where children studied, and the benches and tables for the dining room where they ate. They will also help repair and organize the return move of the Centre's research library.

MDS is supplying the volunteers; MCC will assist with cultural orientation, along with funding the cost of the materials.

“The project is steeped in a story we are a part of,” says Mollins Koene, noting Mennonites founded and ran three residential schools in Northwestern Ontario.

Through the project, MCC and MDS are inviting its constituent churches “to work as part of a story that talks about a colonial history that is still part of Canada today,” she adds, noting Woodland Cultural Centre “has extended a hand to us to be members of a three-way partnership.”

For Carley Gallant-Jenkins, Outreach Coordinator at Woodland, it’s “very important to us to have MCC and MDS alongside, offering their support and services.”

After almost five years of work, “we are finally seeing the end in sight,” she says, adding the assistance from MCC and MDS “will help us get back into the building.”

She’s excited about the contribution from the MDS volunteers.

“The furniture will help set the tone for the space, showing what it was like when children were sent there,” Gallant-Jenkins says.

The dining hall restoration will be particularly poignant. “Siblings who were sent to the school were separated. In the dining hall, they couldn’t talk to each other, but at least they could see each other from a distance,” she shares.

In addition to the work, volunteers will get a chance to assist with an archeological dig taking place on the grounds of the school.

“That will make the experience even richer,” says Gallant-Jenkins. “Imagine what it will be like to find something that once belonged to a student, a coin, a button or something else.”

Along with the work, volunteers will participate in cultural and historical orientations, and also meet survivors.

“They are hard stories to hear, but so important if we are to move forward together,” she shares.

Adds Mollins Koene: “The project is more than restoring a building. It’s about restoring relationships between Nations, and between individuals.”

The first group of weekly youth volunteers, from Kitchener’s Stirling Avenue and St. Jacobs Mennonite churches, arrives July 7, followed by youth from the Listowel and Elimira, Ont. Mennonite churches, Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford, B.C., and the Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church.

For more information about Woodland Cultural Centre or the MCC/MDS project, contact:

Carley Gallant-Jenkins, Outreach Coordinator, Woodland Cultural Centre, 519-759-2650,
cgallant@woodlandculturalcentre.ca

Lyndsay Mollins Koene, Indigenous Neighbours Program Coordinator MCC Ontario, 705-264-2494, lyndsaymollinskoene@mcco.ca

Nick Hamm, Ontario Unit Chair, MDS Canada, 905-401-3990, hammnicholas.mds@outlook.com

Attached Photo: At the New Hamburg Mennonite Relief Sale, representatives from Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Woodland Cultural Centre started an important step on the road to promoting reconciliation, healing and awareness by signing an agreement to work together on the Save the Evidence Project. (pictured left to right John Head, Executive Director of MCC Ontario, Nick Hamm, Ontario Unit Chair of MDS Canada, Carley Gallant-Jenkins, Outreach Coordinator of Woodland Cultural Centre). MCC Photo/Jesse Bergen